OCTOBER 25, 1984

Late one evening a few weeks ago, a gigantic amphitheater of clouds appeared in the eastern sky of the Shortgrass Country. Twists and curlicues and swirls of the deepest purples highlighted by brilliant silvers and grays. A huge celestial cone shaped like a tremendous sea shell was holding rain and storm, and wind that well could relieve the misery of a million acres of land or a hundred townships of people.

My rain vigil bad intensified when I left the ranch to drive toward San Angelo. The pickup windshield had framed the cloud formation. For miles I drove along hypnotized by this big storm signal.

A few miles out of Mertzon, the huge cloud formation began to unfold and reform. Front-lighted by the setting sun, the dark purples blackened and rose among the waves of grays and whites.

I was forced to stop. Pickups and cars were scurrying home from the darkness; oil transports and oilfield gangs were roaring toward their base. Parked, I could feel that stillness that rocks a windmill wheel and reveals the indecision of the winds. Dwarfed under the system was the outline of San Angelo. The turbulence continued.

Drouths are measured by counties and combined into geographical designations that are easy to recognize. For example, the Pecos River Valley westward into New Mexico, or the Trans-Pecos to the Big Bend. But t-hat isn't accurate. A drouth goes to the very core of the earth until the dryness contacts the dreadful heat of the center. There it blends with those awful temperatures and blasts the face of the land.

I don't know how long I stood there. Raindrops drummed on the pickup hood, big ones splashing on the windshield. After the winter of '83, the drouth of '84 seemed to be coming to an end. We'll know later if it's really ending.